

A SENSE OF ABILITY YOGA INSTRUCTION HELPS DISABLED CHILDREN,  
PARENTS SAY: [ALL EDITION]

Matt Mullins Wisconsin State Journal. Wisconsin State Journal [Madison, Wis] 28 July 1999: 1.

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Steven Chagnon's face creases into a wide, toothy grin the moment he finds himself in the arms of Jonathan Garber. Steven pushes his tongue out between his teeth, waves one arm vigorously, and clasps Garber with the other.

Now 28 months old, Steven has Down syndrome, a congenital abnormality that retards physical and mental development.

Garber has arrived to give Steven one of his semi-weekly yoga lessons.

Steven's parents, Laurie and Mike, have added yoga to a list of services they employ for Steven, including work with occupational, physical, speech and play therapists.

"They compare people with disabilities to a child without disabilities," said Mike. "It's just almost overwhelming."

Steven, they say, matches the developmental level of most 15-month-olds who do not have Down syndrome.

The Chagnons are quick to praise the work of these specialists.

"The physical therapists, the occupational therapists, they're wonderful in a realm of the physical," said Laurie.

But affirmation evades such medical-based perspectives for the Chagnons. Which is where Garber comes in.

A massage therapist and yoga instructor with a background in education at public and alternative schools, Garber runs a business called Yoga for Children with Special Needs. Garber has about a half-dozen clients he visits in their homes, and he also teaches a yoga class for several children who do not have disabilities.

But special-needs children can find particular appeasement with yoga.

"It's really meeting the child where they're at," explained Garber. "What's truly important about the yoga is it puts the relationship first."

Garber begins the yoga session with Laurie as a way of modeling the cooperation and calm the session offers Steven. It also helps Laurie focus on what Steven will be doing. Since Garber visits for only 50 minutes each session, Laurie must be able to assist Steven with practicing his yoga poses.

Laurie explains that Steven struggles with his concentration. When placed on the mat, he generally wriggles around like many toddlers do. But after only a month and a half of yoga, Laurie sees a change.

"I've noticed that his concentration is (greater)," she said. "Now, he will lay down. He focuses in on my face. He allows me to do each of the body moves."

Garber adds that Steven seems less stressed, as well.

"I see a much calmer boy," said Garber.

Mike and Laurie agreed.

One of the elements of the yoga work Garber does with Steven includes eye tracking exercises. Steven, like many Down children, has eyes which tend to wander and dart back

and forth. Garber and Laurie feel Steven's eyes are slightly more stable, slightly more under Steven's deliberate control, since he began his work with Garber.

Mike hopes the yoga will help Steven develop discipline and strength.

"Yoga will increase muscle tone," said Mike. "He can use that to strengthen body parts and improve concentration."

Garber works with children who have a variety of disabilities, from autism to cerebral palsy to attention deficit disorder. He shifts the emphasis of sessions with individual clients based on the emotional and developmental needs of the child at the time of the visit.

With Steven, he speaks buoyantly and enthusiastically.

"With Steven, it's all about concentration," said Garber. "I create mental vigor."

One child Garber works with who has cerebral palsy requires a more relaxed, less cajoling approach.

"I listen to whatever they have to say," said Garber. In both cases, the child's emotional condition is easy to read and to react to.

With autistic children, a less reactionary structure is required, according to Garber.

"A tantrum has no emotional meaning to them," he said. "It's really hard to notice sometimes where they're at. You can't look into their eyes and know where their emotions are."

Liz Hecht's son Will, 10, has cerebral palsy and has worked with Garber for a year and a half. "Will clearly enjoys it and continues to practice some of the techniques he learns, on his own," said Hecht.

Children with cerebral palsy frequently have a tendency to breathe shallowly, says Hecht. "How one breathes . . . is a central part of yoga," she said. "When Will gets very upset, one of the things I ask him to do is try yoga breathing so he can get himself calmed down so we can talk."

When Will calms himself down with yoga, he feels a sense of accomplishment and self-control. Hecht says Will's physical therapist finds referring to yoga breathing helpful in her work with him.

Will has reached physical milestones with Garber. For instance, Will does sit-ups in his sessions with Garber. "They've kept count," said Hecht. "We've had a 1,000-sit-up party, and a 2,000-sit-up party."

Hecht has seen her son improve control of his head and his legs through the sit-ups.

Charles Stephens has a 12-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy who sees Garber.

(Stephens asked that her name be withheld.)

"She walks with more confidence, she holds things steadier, and she's calmer," he said.

The staggered, halting gait typical of children with cerebral palsy has diminished as well.

"The more that she feels she can control her body the way she wants to, it feeds its own little success loop," said Stephens.

If nothing else, each of the parents appreciates that sense of accomplishment yoga offers their child. "By the time he's 10, (Steven) will be quite adept at yoga," said Laurie. "Not a lot of other 10-year-olds will be."

Illustration

Caption: OLIVIA OGREN/WSJ photos Laurie Chagnon and Jonathan Garber end a yoga session with her son Steven, center, by singing about light. Garber teaches yoga to Laurie as well as to Steven, so she can help her son practice yoga positions. RIGHT: Jonathan

Garber supports Steven Chagnon's arms as the boy arches back into the Cobra position. Laurie and Mike Chagnon, Steven's parents, have already seen improvement in Steven's head control, as well as his concentration. BELOW: Steven sticks out his tongue, Michael Jordan- style, as Jonathan Garber pushes his leg through a yoga stretch. Garber embraces Steven, who has Down syndrome, before they begin their yoga session. Garber looks Steven in the eyes and speaks quietly but enthusiastically in order to draw Steven's attention. Help \*What: Information on Yoga for Children with Special Needs can be secured by phone, by E-mail and by pen. \*How: Contact Jonathan Garber at 246-8515 or jgarber@terra.com.net, or by addressing a letter to him at 2537 E. Johnson St., Madison, Wis. 53704.

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